



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement in support of Georgian Proposal for an Assessment Mission

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 19, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States would like to extend its strong support for the proposal just made by the Georgian Ambassador to send an assessment mission under the Chair's mandate to investigate and report on the situation along the Chechnya sector of the Georgia-Russia border, and on the security implications of the BMO closure.

We urge you, Mr. Chairman, to act positively on this proposal and to do so without delay.

The Georgia BMO has played a critical role in confidence building, increasing transparency and in eliminating tensions along Georgia's sensitive border with the Russian Federation in the Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan sectors.

As we have stated previously, we believe that the closure of the BMO would remove a key source of peaceful relations and of objective reporting on events at the sensitive border and increase the likelihood of heightened Russia-Georgia tensions.

President Saakashvili himself told a group of our OSCE Ambassadors, many of you will recall, on a trip that we took as a group last fall, that since the OSCE border monitoring operation he had heard of no complaints from Russia about terrorists and infiltrations in the Pankisi Gorge.

That said, we are now greatly concerned by a January 17 statement by the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi, which alleges that 250-300, and here I quote, "Chechen and foreign terrorists," end quote, are living in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.

This statement contradicts Russia's position that the BMO is no longer needed because the situation has improved. It also raises concerns in light of the January 13 statement by Russian Defense Minister Ivanov, who asserted that Russia was ready to preemptively hit terrorist bases outside Russian territory.

So for this reason, we strongly support sending an assessment mission to evaluate the situation along the Chechnya sector of the Georgia-Russia border.

Moreover, given the possibility that the security situation could deteriorate further if the Russian concerns are indeed verified, we believe that further drawdown of the BMO should be suspended until this assessment team has had a chance to report its conclusions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.